

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 228 - The System A0

Without knowing exactly since when, the group was running so fast that those with the weakest endurance were beginning to pant loudly. Those whose the Aether stats were below 40 before the Ordeal automatically had their stats raised to the Ordeal's Aether density, which was the best gift the Oracle could give them in terms of fairness. If they still couldn't keep up, this Ordeal just wasn't for them.

The first Ordeal had the decency to give different tasks to different people, because each person's starting point was different. However, even the 'non-physical' Ordeals required a minimum amount of physical activity, ensuring that each Player was at least able to run decently at the end of it.

Just as children were entitled to a first special extended Ordeal to accelerate their growth and maturity, obese, elderly or physically impaired people followed their own course and the special rewards offered ensured that their physique met the standards required for the second Ordeal.

If a participant was still unable to keep up with the running pace of the Oracle Guardian, there were only two possible explanations. Either the Player had lost his physical condition after his first Ordeal, due to sedentary lifestyle, malnutrition or an unhealthy lifestyle. Or, his will to persevere was simply insufficient.

Since there were no elderly or overweight people among them, the breathless people at the back of the pack had no excuse and could only clench their teeth and try to push their limits.

Jake, his group and his cousins had no trouble following the Oracle Guardian, but the spinning of the asteroid and the crowd of people around them made the experience all the more unpleasant.

Minutes and then hours went by without anyone uttering a word. Only the heavy step of their gait and their controlled or jerky breathing were buzzing in the ears of the participants.

Will couldn't stand the hush, so he decided to talk about astronomy, since it had been one of his interests when he still lived on Earth.

'Any idea why there are no stars in the sky except for this tiny white sun?' Will raised his riddle, seeking their interest, but it was obvious from his tone that he had a pretty good idea of the answer.

'No clue.' Tim said as he approached the businessman to better hear the explanation.

'Neither do I.' Kyle grumbled as he tried to recall any scientific articles he'd read in the past.

Sarah and the two sisters were silent, but they were also waiting for the answer. It wouldn't have made much difference to the two princesses, though, since their knowledge of the cosmos in their home world was limited to that of the Middle Ages. That they were aware that their planet Ega was not flat was already commendable.

'It's a white dwarf.' The deep voice of the Oracle Guardian overshadowed Will's own voice as he was about to answer them to his greatest frustration. So much for teasing them for so long.

'The Systems are numbered according to their seniority in the Mirror Universe using numbers and letters. A through Z and 0 through 999. For those of you who have forgotten, your planet B842 is part of the System ZZ831. It's a very young system.'

‘System A0 is the oldest place in the Mirror Universe. Once the stars run out of fuel, they explode into Supernovae or/and collapse on themselves depending on their mass. If they are too light to form a black hole or neutron star, they form a red dwarf which, when they cool down, becomes a brown dwarf or white dwarf. If enough time passes, after about 1 nonillion, these white dwarfs cool down completely and stop emitting light. They become black dwarfs.

‘That’s why there are no stars in the sky except for this tiny white dwarf. This universe is so old that it’s just full of black holes and black dwarfs. It’s called the Degenerate Era in cosmology. Any life form that can thrive swimming among these Black Holes is not something you can fathom at your present level...’

‘Oh...’ That was the word on the tip of their gaping lips. This Oracle Guardian was actually quite talkative once you got him started on a subject he was passionate about! And it was extremely fascinating, to be honest. Will was drinking the alien’s words like a fanatical believer listening to a priest’s mass.

Jake listened calmly, but he couldn’t help but curse the Oracle who had sent them to this star graveyard. Were it not for the certainty that they could not die during their second Ordeal, he would have viewed this Ordeal as a suicide mission.

After this short astronomy lesson, the Oracle Guardian once again withdrew into its silence and this time the darkness around them gave them a very different impression. A feeling of extreme insignificance.

The hours continued to fly by without any Sanctuary Bubbles unveiling before them, the landscape remaining virtually invariant throughout their forced journey. After an indeterminate amount of time, another issue they hadn’t foreseen arose.

Tvuw guefr om duui vprezw frt ovazlow, frt dmz lmqu, f nzullare pzeu om pzarfou ommc msuz ovuaz ovmpevol. Tvuw vft ruaovuz jfouz rmz dmmt frt ovulu jmpit vfsu guur pluiull ar lnfhu frwjfw. Tvu uypanquero ovfo Jfcu vft lm quoahpimpliw nzunfzut gudmzu ovu Oztufi jfl rm imreuz jaov vaq. Tm jmrtuz jvw ovuaz ezfrtdfovuz jfl lm cuur om vfsu ovuq eufz pn gudmzu ao ?!

The rapid rotation of the asteroid on itself, the day/night cycles following one another, the oppressive darkness of the cosmos and the monotony of the scenery gradually eroded their sanity and what was bound to happen, eventually happened.

One man, dripping with sweat in his spacesuit, began to have an anxiety attack. He was already claustrophobic to begin with, and it was a miracle that he had lasted so long.

Completely out of his mind with panic, he started to tug on his helmet with all his might, trying by all means to get rid of it, and he succeeded! He mentally deactivated the safety devices of the suit with the help of his bracelet and he was finally able to smell the fresh vacuum of the cosmos.

With the asteroid now in its night cycle, many of the Players who witnessed the scene expected to see his eyes or head explode, or at the very least see his body freeze instantly. After all, the Oracle Guardian's force field ensured that the ground beneath their feet remained cold enough for their armor to withstand it.

This was not what happened.

Movies had instilled many misconceptions, and death in space was one of them. Since there was no atmosphere, it was impossible to lose heat by thermal convection. It could only be lost by radiation and it was a very slow process.

In other words, this claustrophobic Player didn't freeze and for a few seconds he was able to observe the sidereal vacuum without interference. Then the pressure difference due to the vacuum took effect.

Because he was gasping, with his mouth wide open his lungs emptied in a fraction of a second. Because of the pressure difference, his body fluids began to boil and his body swelled to twice its original size. As for his eyes, they exploded. Because the skin was elastic, the poor man was still alive.

Because of his decent constitution, it took more than a minute before the panicking Player lost consciousness, and although he regretted his gesture, the pain, panic and his punctured eyes prevented him from putting his helmet back on in time. In his panic, the participant pushed away all those who tried to help him and the Players had to resign themselves to letting him die in excruciating agony.

Tvu Ozfhiu Gpfztafr, jvm hmpit vfsu uflaiw lfsut vaq, zuqfarut prqmsut gw ovu lhuru. Bw vfioare qmqurofzaiw om nzusuro oval nfzoahanfro dzmq guare iudo guvart, vu duio vu vft fizuftw easur vaq ovu hvfrhu vu tuluzsut. Ir ovu urt, vu jfl bplo mru imluz fqmre qfrw.

This second horrible death, however, had a wonderfully revitalizing effect on the other survivors. After such a sight, those who felt vaguely cramped inside their suits found that finally they could bear with it for a while longer without any problems.

Those who needed to urinate pissed into their spacesuit without hesitation, and it turned out that the suit was designed to handle this type of biological urge. A tank attached to their thigh was responsible for storing and recycling urine and sweat. However, there was no indication that the suit could handle 'solid' biological waste and fortunately they did not have to find out the answer.

After this incident, the participants kept running relentlessly without showing any sign of weakness, until finally a dome-shaped object emerged in front of them. As they kept closing in, they ran another twenty kilometers or so until the Sanctuary Bubble, which was half-buried, fully encompassed their field of vision.

In front of the enormous structure, millions of Players made up of groupings like theirs were crowded together, patiently waiting for something.

They had finally reached their destination.